

Section C: Success Stories

April 2011 – September 2011

Increasing the Use of Native Plants on Virginia's Eastern Shore through Community-Based Social Marketing

CZMA Performance Measure Area: Coastal Habitat Protection, Coastal Water Quality Protection, Government Coordination

Identification & Description of Issue: The Eastern Shore of Virginia is an incredibly unique and rich coastal environment supporting an array of fish, shellfish and bird species. It is the largest source of cultured hard clams on the East Coast, an industry worth over \$50,000,000 that depends on excellent water quality. Over 400 species of birds make the Shore a bird-watchers paradise. Each fall the migration of millions of birds through the region contribute a source of ecotourism revenue that depends on protection of critical migratory bird stopover habitat. An increase in native vegetation on the Shore will provide water quality benefits critical to maintaining a potable water supply on the Shore, help maintain optimal water quality for Virginia's shellfish aquaculture industry and help provide critical sources of energy for migratory birds. Over the last three years, the Virginia CZM program has been working with local partners on *Plant ES Natives* – a community-based social marketing campaign to increase the use of native plants on the Shore.

Geographic Location: The Eastern Shore of Virginia on the lower Delmarva Peninsula including the counties of Accomack and Northampton (Congressional District 2).

How the Virginia CZM Program Was Involved: In April 2009, the Virginia CZM Program and its partners launched the “Plant ES Natives” social marketing campaign through the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program (VSHP). From 2003 – 2009, this \$2.6 million CZM funded program built ecotourism infrastructure and restored eelgrass, oyster, marsh and beach-nesting bird habitat in and around the barrier island-lagoon system. Funds were set aside in the VSHP for a social marketing campaign aimed at changing human behavior to help protect this investment. Given the many virtues of native vegetation, it was clear that a campaign should focus on increasing the use of native plants. Virginia CZM and its partners have been working for 20 years on this issue. In 1989 a songbird study, funded through an interstate CZM grant from NOAA, documented the critical importance of the lower Delmarva Peninsula as a major migratory bird “stopover.” In 1991, the Virginia CZM program began working with Northampton County on a Special Area Management Plan (SAMP) to protect bird and fish habitats by maintaining maximum native vegetative cover. In 1996 and again 2003, Virginia CZM worked with the county to introduce vegetation ordinances which would have restricted the amount of existing native vegetation that a property owner could remove. It was close, but these ordinances were not adopted. Although adoption of the ordinance did not happen, educational efforts have been successful in raising public awareness of the importance of the Shore's native habitat, including educational publications funded by Virginia CZM such as *Virginia Hospitality* and *Migratory Birds of the Lower Delmarva – A Landowners Guide* and an annual Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival in 1993.



Although public awareness about the value of native plants was increasing, there was still a limited and scattered increase in the use of native plants. It was clear that another approach to changing landowner actions was necessary. Virginia CZM learned, through its funding support for the successful Chesapeake Club social

marketing campaign (of “Save the Crabs Then Eat ‘Em” fame), how social marketing goes beyond raising awareness and effects what people *do*, and how we could actually popularize behaviors to improve the quality of the environment. Our first step was to form a multi-partner, locally-based campaign planning team, whose members helped research and design the Plant ES Natives campaign, and who remain engaged in implementation of the campaign. Virginia CZM staff continues to coordinate and guide the multi-year campaign.

Design of the new “Plant ES Natives Campaign” was guided by listening to the Shore community through pre-campaign research that identified the barriers inhibiting the planting of natives and the benefits landowners perceived they would get if they increased their use of natives. The research also helped us identify what multi-media approach would be most effective in reaching an Eastern Shore audience. The results of the survey can be found in detail in a campaign overview report downloadable from the campaign website - <http://www.deq.virginia.gov/coastal/documents/plantesnativescampaignsummarystatusreportupdated2-2011.pdf>. Our research showed that there were many misconceptions about natives, including the idea that natives were scraggly and unattractive, there was an uncertainty about which plants were native to Northampton and Accomack counties, and that people’s main goal was beautification. With the research findings in hand, the campaign planning team designed the “Plant ES Natives” campaign, which focuses on the beauty of natives with the slogan “They’re Shore Beautiful! – and highlights the habitat value of natives.

The campaign makes it easier for residents to identify and purchase natives, and supports the local economy, through a series of noticeable, eye-catching, self-explanatory prompts at point of sale, including a “Native Plants Sold Here” banner and identifying tags on the plants. Radio ads encourage gardeners to plant native and to ask for native plants at local garden centers. A colorful guide to Eastern Shore native plant provides a list of natives developed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Natural Heritage based on the Flora of Virginia Project. Eight native plant demonstration gardens have been established, many funded through Virginia CZM grants, to showcase the beauty of Eastern Shore native plants. To tap into the interpersonal connections that characterize the Shore and in our focus on a community-based approach, the campaign also includes a “Community Leader” program. Over 35 leaders trained this year to help implement the campaign and share the campaign’s message and their knowledge of ES native plants.

Qualitative Summary of Accomplishments and Outcomes: The native plant demonstration gardens have been very well received within the Shore’s communities. Local residents, community groups, landscapers and garden centers and nurseries have contributed to planting and maintaining the gardens. All of the demos have been adopted – a number of them by local garden centers and nurseries. Response to the guide has been extremely positive. So much so that the first 2,500 copies of the guide - “Native Plants of Accomack and Northampton” were scooped up, and we reprinted another 2,500. Garden centers are reporting that customers are bringing in a copy. The *Plant ES Natives* campaign uses “Community-Based Social Marketing” techniques which have proved particularly appropriate in an area characterized by smaller, “neighbor to neighbor” tight-knit communities. This can be demonstrated in the response to the “Community Leader” component of the campaign, and how these members share their experiences engaging friends and neighbors in planting native.

Quantitative Summary of Accomplishment and Outcomes: Up front, Virginia CZM and its partners identified that the key measure of behavior change in the Plant ES Natives campaign is an increase in the sales of native plants. Early indicators of the Plant ES Natives campaign’s influence are very encouraging. One Eastern Shore garden center reported that native plants sales are up 8-10% since the campaign was implemented in April 2009. Another center/nursery is beginning to grow up to 40 native plants in anticipation of greater demand, while a local nursery indicated that they planned to focus future planting on native shrubs and asked the campaign for advice on species. A new garden center has opened since the campaign began that not only offers a native plant section but plans to offer educational seminars on planting and best management practices.

We conducted a mid-campaign survey in Spring 2010 to gauge the effectiveness of our messaging and promotional products. The survey confirmed that the campaign's messaging – "They're Shore Beautiful" is on track. A summary of these findings is also in the campaign overview report online at <http://www.deq.virginia.gov/coastal/documents/plantesnativescampaignsummarystatusreportupdated2-2011.pdf>.

CZM Funds Expended & Other Funds Leveraged: Since its initial investment of \$10,000 under the VSHP, the Virginia CZM has expended \$83,667 to continue implementation of the Plant ES Natives campaign through FY06-FY10 funds.